

HATRACK

BY HERBERT ASBURY

WHEN I was a boy in Farmington, Missouri, it was the custom of our pastors and pious brethren, and of the professional devil-chasers who were imported as reinforcements from time to time, to proclaim loudly and incessantly that our collective morals were compounded of a slice of Sodom and a cut of Gomorrah, with an extract of Babylon to flavor the stew. They worried constantly and fretfully over our amorous activities; they regarded every man except the very aged and decrepit as a potential seducer, and every young girl as a prospective daughter of sin, whose salvation depended almost entirely upon the volume of noise they themselves could make.

In their more feverish discourses appeared significant references to the

great difficulty of remaining pure, and in effect they advised our young women to go armed to the teeth, prepared to do battle in defense of their virginity. These gloomy predictions of the inevitability of seduction naturally had a tremendous effect upon young minds; very likely it was after she had heard the ravings of such an evangelist that the little girl of the fable, requested by her teacher to define a virgin, replied, "A female person under five years of age."

In all the small towns of the Middle West this sort of thing was the principal stock in trade of those who would lead their brethren to the worship of the current God. I do not recall ever having heard an evangelist, whether professional or amateur, who did not assure his hearers that their town was

HERBERT ASBURY leaped into the national spotlight literally overnight with the appearance of "Hatrack," which the New England Watch and Ward Society and other bluenoses denounced as "salacious." For a time they managed to have that issue of THE AMERICAN MERCURY barred from public sale and banned from the mails. The editor personally went to Boston and had himself arrested, as a test case, on Boston Common for selling the issue. There ensued a long series of litigations, during which "Hatrack" achieved a popularity probably unequalled in the history of periodical journalism. The article may appear somewhat tame now, but that is only because the public attitude toward "salacious" literature has matured — a maturity for which the crusading of the MERCURY is in large part responsible. The article, which first appeared in April 1926, is one of a series of occasional MERCURY reprints.

overrun by harlots, and that brothels abounded in which leading citizens abandoned themselves to shameful orgies while church attendance dwindled, and collections became smaller and smaller, and chicken appeared less and less frequently upon the ministerial table. Their tirades were generally in this fashion:

Shall we permit these painted daughters of Jezebel, these bedizened hussies, to stalk the streets of this fair city and flaunt their sin in the face of the Lord? Shall we permit them to lure our sons and brothers into their vile haunts and ply their nefarious trade in the very shadow of the House of God? No! I say NO! Jesus Christ must live in this town!

Immediately everyone shouted, "Amen, Brother!" and "Praise the Lord!" But it was sometimes difficult to determine whether the congregation praised the Lord for inspiring the evangelist to so courageously defy the harlots, or for permitting him to discover them. If the Man of God could find them, why not the damned too? Certainly there were always many who wondered if the brother had acquired any good addresses or telephone numbers since coming to town. Not infrequently, indeed, he was stealthily shadowed home by young men eager to settle that question.

These charges and denunciations

were repeated by the evangelist at the meetings for men only, which were always a most interesting feature of the revivals. At similar gatherings for women, or ladies, as we called them in small town journalism, his wife or a devout sister discussed the question from the feminine viewpoint. What went on at these latter conclaves I do not know, though I can guess, for I have often seen young girls coming out of them giggling and blushing. The meetings for men only were juicy indeed. The evangelist discussed all angles of the subject, and in a very free manner. His own amorous exploits before he became converted were recited in considerable detail, and he painted vivid word pictures of the brothels he had visited, both as a paying client and in the course of his holy work. Almost invariably they were subterranean palaces hung with silks and satins, with soft rugs upon the floor, and filled with a vast multitude of handsome young women, all as loose as ashes. Having thus intimated, with some smirking, that for many years he was almost the sole support of harlotry, he became confidential. He leaned forward and said:

"There are such Dens of the Devil right here in your town!"

This was first-class information, and immediately there was a stir in the audience, many of his hearers betraying an eagerness to be gone. But be-

fore they could get away the evangelist thundered:

"Shall we permit them to continue their wicked practices?"

I always hoped to be present some day when the audience forgot itself and answered that question with the reply that was so plainly in its mind, namely, "Yes!" But alas, I never heard it, although there was much shouting of "Amen!" and "Glory to God!" These meetings for men only were generally held in the afternoon, and their net result was that the business of the drugstore increased immediately, and when *night fell bands* of young good-for-nothings scurried hither and yon about the town, searching feverishly for the Dens of the Devil. They searched without fear, confident that modern science would save them from any untoward consequences, and knowing that no matter what they did they would go to heaven if they permitted a minister to intercede for them in the end, or a priest to oil them with holy unguents.

But the Dens of the Devil were not found, neither in Farmington nor in any other small town in that region, for the very good reason that they did not exist. The evangelist did not know what he was talking about; he was simply using stock blather that he had found by experience would excite the weak-minded to both sexual and religious emotions, which are very

similar. He knew that when they were thus upset they would be less likely to question his ravings — that they would be more pliable in his hands and easier to convert. It is, in fact, well-nigh impossible to convert anyone who can keep his head and retain control of his emotions. Such a person is likely to giggle during the most solemn moments, and nothing is more destructive of evangelical fervor than a hearty giggle.

II

Our small towns were not overrun by harlots for the plain reason that harlotry could not flourish in a small town. It was economically impossible; there were not enough cash customers to make the scarlet career profitable. Also, the poor girls had to meet too much competition from emotional ladies who had the professional spirit but retained their amateur standing by various technicalities. And harlots, like the rest of us, had to live; they required the same sort of raiment and food that sufficed their virtuous sisters; it was not until they died that they wore nothing but the smoke of hell and were able to subsist on a diet of brimstone and sulphur.

Many men who in larger communities would have patronized the professionals could not do so in a small town. They could not afford to; it was too dangerous. The moment a woman

was suspected of being a harlot she was watched eagerly by everyone from the mayor down to the preachers, and the name of every man seen talking to her, or even looking at her, went winging swiftly from mouth to mouth, and was finally posted on the heavenly bulletin board as that of an immoral wretch. A house in which harlotry was practiced was picketed day and night by small boys eager to learn the forbidden mysteries, and by brethren and sisters hopefully sniffing. It was not possible for a harlot to keep her clientèle secret, for the sexual life of a small town is an open book, and news of amorous doings could not travel faster if each had a tabloid newspaper.

Exact statistics, of course, are not available, but it is probably true that no small American town has ever harbored a harlot whose professional income was sufficient to feed and clothe her. Few if any such towns have ever been the abode of more than one harlot at a time. When I was a boy every one had its own harlot, just as it had its town sot (this, of course, was before drunkards became extinct), and its town idiot. But she was generally a poor creature who was employed by day as a domestic servant and practiced her ancient art only in her hours of leisure. She turned to it partly for economic reasons, and partly because of a great yearning for

human companionship, which she could obtain in no other way. She remained in it because she was almost instantly branded a Daughter of Satan, and shunned by good and bad alike. She seldom, if ever, realized that she was doing wrong; her moral standards were those of a bedbug. She thought of harlotry in terms of new ribbons and an occasional pair of shoes, and in terms of social intercourse; she was unmoral rather than immoral, and the proceeds of her profession, to her, were just so much extra spending money.

Small town men who occasionally visited the larger cities, and there thought nothing of spending from ten to fifty dollars in metropolitan brothels, were very stingy in dealing with the town harlot. They considered a dollar an enormous price for her, and frequently they refused to give her anything. Many small communities were not able to support even a part-time harlot; consequently some members of the craft went from town to town, taking secular jobs and practicing harlotry as a side line until driven out by the godly or until the inevitable business depression occurred. I recall one who made several towns along the O. K. Railroad in Northeastern Missouri as regularly as the shoe drummers. Her studio was always an empty box car on the town siding, and she had a mania for in-

scribing in such cars the exact dates and hours of her adventures, and her honoraria. It was not unusual to find in a car some such inscription as this:

Ten P.M., July 8. Fifty cents.

These writings, scrawled in lead pencil or with a bit of chalk, were signed "Box Car Molly." Once, in a car from which I had unloaded many heavy bags of cement, I came across what seemed to be a choice bit of very early, and apparently authentic Box-Car-Molliana. On the wall was this:

I was ruined in this car May 10.

Box Car Molly

III

Our town harlot in Farmington was a scrawny creature called variously Fanny Fewclothes and Hatrack, but usually the latter in deference to her figure. When she stood with her arms outstretched she bore a remarkable resemblance to the tall hatracks then in general use in our homes, and since she was always most amiable and obliging, she was frequently asked to pose thus for the benefit of drummers and other infidels. In time, she came to take a considerable pride in this accomplishment; she referred to herself as a model, and talked vaguely of abandoning her wicked life and going to St. Louis, where she was sure she could make a living posing for artists.

Six days a week Hatrack was a

competent and more or less virtuous drudge employed by one of our best families, but Sunday was her day off, and she then, in turn, offered her soul to the Lord and went to the devil. For the latter purpose she utilized the Masonic and Catholic cemeteries, which were side by side, although their occupants presumably went to different heavens. Hatrack's regular Sunday night parade, her descent from righteousness to sin, was one of the most fascinating events of the week, and promptly after supper those of us who did not have engagements to take young ladies to church (which was practically equivalent to publishing the banns), went downtown to the loafing place in front of the Post Office and waited impatiently.

On week days Hatrack turned a deaf ear to the blandishments of our roués, but on Sunday night she was very gracious and receptive. This, however, was not until she had gone to church and had been given to understand, tacitly but none the less clearly, that there was no room for her in the Kingdom of Heaven. Our Sunday night services usually began about eight o'clock, following the meetings of the various young people's societies. At seven thirty, regardless of the weather, the angular figure of Hatrack could be discerned coming down the hill from the direc-

tion of the cemeteries. She lived somewhere in that section and worked by the day. She was always dressed in her best, and in her eyes was the light of a great resolve. She was going to church, and there was that in her walk and manner which said that thereafter she was going to lead a better life.

There was always a group of men waiting for her around the Post Office. But although several always muttered, "Here she comes!" it was not good form to speak to her then, and she walked past them as though she had not seen them. But they, with their wide knowledge of the vagaries of the agents of the Lord, grinned hopefully and settled down to wait. They knew she would be back. She went on up the street past the Court House and turned into the Northern Methodist Church, where she took a seat in the last row. All about her were empty seats; if they were not empty when she got there they were soon vacated. No one spoke to her. No one asked her to come to Jesus. No one held out a welcoming hand. No one prayed for her. No one offered her a hymn-book. At the protracted meetings and revivals, which she invariably attended, none of the brothers and sisters tried to convert her; she was a Scarlet Woman and belonged to the devil. There was no place for her in a respectable congrega-

tion. They could not afford to be seen talking to her, even in church, where God's love, by their theory, made brothers and sisters of us all.

It was painful to watch her; she listened to the Word with such rapt attention; she sang the hymns with such fanatical fervor, and she plainly yearned for the comforts of that barbaric religion and the blessings of easy intercourse with decent people. But she never got them. From the Christians and their God she got nothing but scorn. Of all the sinners in our town Hatrack would have been the easiest to convert; she was so eager for salvation. If a preacher, or a brother, or a sister, had so much as spoken a kind word to her she would have dropped to her knees and given up her soul. And her conversion, in all likelihood, would have been permanent, for she was not mentally equipped for a struggle against the grandiose improbabilities of revealed religion. If someone had told her, as I was told, that God was an old man with long whiskers, she would not have called him "Daddy," as some of her more flippant city sisters might have done; she would have accepted Him and gloried in Him.

But she was not plucked from the burning, for the workers for the Lord would have nothing to do with her, and by the end of the service her eyes had grown sullen and her lip had

curled upward in a sneer. Before the final hymn was sung and the benediction pronounced upon the congregation she got to her feet and left the church. None tried to stop her; she was not wanted in the House of God. I have seen her sit alone and miserably unhappy while the preacher bellowed a sermon about forgiveness, with the whole church rocking to a chorus of "amens" as he told the stories of various Biblical harlots, and how God had forgiven them.

But for Hatrack there was no forgiveness. Mary Magdalene was a Saint in heaven, but Hatrack remained a harlot in Farmington. Every Sunday night for years she went through the same procedure. She was hopeful always that someone would speak to her and make a place for her, that the brothers and sisters who talked so volubly about the grace and the mercy of God would offer her some of the religion that they dripped so freely over everyone else in town. But they did not, and so she went back down the street to the Post Office, swishing her skirts and offering herself to all who desired her. The men who had been waiting for her, and who had known that she would

come, leered at her and hailed her with obscene speech and gesture. And she gave them back leer for leer, meeting their sallies with giggles, and motioning with her head toward the cemeteries.

And so she went up the hill. A little while later a man left the group, remarking that he must go home. He followed her. And a moment after that another left, and then another, until behind Hatrack was a line of men, about one to a block, who would not look at one another, and who looked sheepishly at the ground when they met anyone coming the other way. As each man accosted her in turn Hatrack inquired whether he was a Protestant or a Catholic. If he was a Protestant she took him into the Catholic cemetery; if he was a Catholic they went into the Masonic cemetery.

They paid her what they liked, or nothing, and she was grateful for whatever she received. It was Hatrack who made the remark that was famous in our town for many years. To a stranger who offered her a dollar she said:

"You know damned well I haven't got any change."

